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TAGS: ECON EINT PGOV TINT KMPI JO
SUBJECT: E-GOVERNMENT: LOTS OF POTENTIAL BUT LITTLE ACTUAL
IMPLEMENTATION TO DATE

¶1. (U) Summary: After years of effort with few results, Jordan
launched several e-government projects this summer, including those
that will allow businesses to check their tax records online and
citizens to review draft legislation. Among the projects in
development are an online business trademark registration
application and an online payment system for government services.
Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (MoICT)
employees, private sector consultants, and other ministries'
information technology (IT) professionals have criticized the
e-government initiative's pace, blaming the Government of Jordan's
(GoJ) poor e-readiness and MoICT's leadership and staff. Jordan's
growing internet penetration and high mobile penetration will,
however, continue to make these tools more useful. End Summary.

e-Government Projects - Very Few Live; Many in Progress
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¶2. (U) After the GOJ announced its intent to work on the
e-government concept in 2001, MoICT was assigned the lead role in
coordinating interagency GoJ efforts. Hassan Hourani, Director of
e-Government at MoICT, has described the e-government initiative as
a national program designed to enhance the performance of government
in terms of service provision, efficiency, accuracy,
cost-effectiveness and transparency. In an August 20 meeting with
Econoffs, Minister of MoICT Basem al-Rousan said that the
e-government initiative was part of a larger national IT strategy to
grow internet use, grow IT-related revenue, and increase the number
of IT professionals. He saw e-government as a way of encouraging
internet use.

¶3. (U) Some of the e-government initiatives have already been
launched, and a Jordanian government portal was established in
November 2006 with links to all government websites. These websites
vary in their interactivity, with the majority providing only
text-based information. On July 19, the Ministry of Planning
launched an interactive website of draft laws and regulations,
allowing the public and civil society organizations to submit
comments. Other interactive websites include the Department of Land
and Surveys which enables citizens to request land drawings to be
used in planning. The Ministry of Finance has an online database
where businesses and citizens can check their income tax records.

¶4. (U) Based on a 2006 e-government strategic plan, MoICT has been
focusing its efforts on payment systems, procurement systems, and
system-wide change management. E-government projects are also in
development at other ministries. Mohammhad Abu Asal, Head of
Information Technology at the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT),
told EconOff that MoIT is finalizing online applications for its
three most common processes: sole proprietorship registration;
trademark registration; and trade name registration. Other GoJ
projects are focused on passport renewal and online income tax
payment for large businesses.

Criticisms of e-Readiness, Leadership, and Staff
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¶5. (SBU) Despite these advances, Bissan Ramahi, Director of Change
Management at MoICT, lamented that the number of active projects is
still very low across ministries. One of the biggest challenges,
according to Hourani, has been limited staffing, given that the
e-government department has 37 on-going projects and only 35
employees. Although the high-profile project initially attracted
talented staff, low salaries and bureaucratic lethargy have
contributed to poor retention and created obstacles for further
recruitment.

¶6. (SBU) Another issue has been e-readiness at the ministries. In
2006, an e-readiness assessment reviewed GoJ and its individual
ministries on connectivity, infrastructure and human capital. Many
of the ministries received very low scores and Bashir Zoubi, Head of
IT at the Income and Sales Tax division of the Ministry of Finance
(MoF), said that the status has not changed significantly in the
last year. The e-government projects that have already launched or
will launch soon were all sponsored by ministries with high
e-readiness scores. Ruba Kajo, MoICT Director of Strategic
Planning, said a great deal of foundational work such as improving
the government's networks, system security, and capabilities of IT
staff needed to be undertaken before customer-facing e-government
services could be launched.

¶7. (SBU) Nearly all of the ministry and private sector officials
also blamed the slow pace on the revolving door of ministers at
MoICT and at other ministries. The owner of a private equity
investment firm in Jordan, Nashat Masri, commented that the small
size of Jordan meant that ministers, especially those with short
terms, often need to focus on maintaining relationships with the

private sector, and as a result are not held accountable for project
implementation.

e-Gov in a Country with Low Internet Penetration
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¶8. (U) One area of optimism for the GoJ is the e-government
initiative's attention to mobile phone services and improving
internet access. Several of the e-government initiatives are
beginning to look at text messaging rather than email communications
because cell phone penetration in Jordan is near 50 percent. Asal
of MoIT said that mobile text notification is an easy addition to
most online processes.

¶9. (U) Post's private sector interlocutors identified internet
penetration as a significant obstacle to e-government adoption.
Hourani estimated internet penetration at 13.5 percent, which he
said was sixth in the region. Minister al-Rousan said that the
barriers to penetration are the cost of computers, the cost of
internet access and a lack of Arabic-language content. In order to
improve access, MoICT has set up 134 "knowledge stations" inside
community centers across the country and provided computer training
to center staff. In addition, in 2008, MoICT hopes to install PCs
in all of the country's post offices, but Hourani said many of them
do not have internet access and a significant amount of training
will be necessary. MoICT Secretary General Abdul Karim Fraihat
described a program to provide laptops to 40,000 Jordanian
university students for $10 per month this year. These laptops are
expected to increase computer access nationwide.

USG Involvement in e-Government

¶10. (U) To address some of the e-readiness challenges, USAID has
been involved in the e-government initiative in Jordan as part of
its goal to improve government back-office operations and processes.
 Through a $20 million court automation program, USAID has
computerized and reengineered the case management system for 65% of
civil court cases in Jordan. By August 2008, USAID will have
automated all 74 civil courts in Jordan and several special courts

related to customs and economic sectors. Lawyers will be able to
submit cases on line; be updated on court dates through email and
SMS; and automated kiosks will be installed in Jordan's largest
court, the new Palace of Justice, to provide up-to-date information
on cases and hearings. USAID has also launched a state-of-the-art
data center for Jordan's schools which connects the kingdom's 3,200
public schools to the internet. USAID and the Middle East
Partnership Initiative (MEPI) have jointly invested about $10
million to develop digital content, connect model schools, and train
teachers. Training for several MoICT project managers at an October
2007 USTDA e-government seminar also aims to develop expertise and
provide additional momentum for the e-government initiative. Most
recently, the Embassy, with support from the Department's Office of
International Information Programs sponsored the August 27-28 visit
of Steven Strauss, a noted e-commerce expert. He presented to
approximately 250 government, business, and student audience members
at a variety of venues including MoICT. His visit received
extensive press coverage in all of the Arabic dailies, particularly
his message of Jordan's potential for economic growth using
e-commerce.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) There is clearly a high level of activity at the MoICT
generated by professionals who are clearly committed, trained in
computer science, have significant and applicable private sector
experience, and are familiar with change management and project
planning. In spite of these talents, however, the initiative's
outputs thus far are underwhelming. Expectations for the future are
also modest, with interactive online tools being deployed by only
the most technologically-savvy ministries and most ministry websites
not yet having interactive applications.

Visit Amman's Classified Website at
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HALE